

"I AM NOT WHAT I AM," ALIENATION IN
OTHELLO

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Seeking self-recognition, definition, image and sexuality coated the baneful relationships of the principal characters in Othello. Their loss and search for the meaning and purpose of their lives were malignant in the interplay of their personalities. They have lost the value expressive aspect of their selves thereby losing their function to express, develop, realize and clarify their inner selves. A sense of alienation that directed them to their insecurities, hostility, failures, pathetic plight and their tragic ends.

"By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which a person experiences himself as an alien. He has become one might say estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts - but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person."¹

Unlike Hamlet or Macbeth, Othello has only one soliloquy. Shakespeare has given us a character who though exalted and yet admired by his social milieu is a moral coward and a defeatist in solitude and self-reflection.

¹ Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1963), p. 120.

Othello was the minority - a Moor. His status built in him fear and the strong desire to be recognized. His soliloquy expressed his knowledge of his difference. He admitted that he lacked the finesse of the Venetian nobility.

..... Haply, for I am black
And have not those parts of conversation
That chamberers have,

(III. iii. 267-69.)

To protect himself from further acknowledging the basic truth about himself or the realities of the society where he is in, he openly displayed his military genius and boasted his odysseys. Through this he won the trust and gained the respect of the Venetian society. He thrived on these achievements to assuage himself of his worth and his dignity. Othello captivated Desdemona by his narrations.

Othello found the definition of his inner self in Desdemona and Iago. Through them he completed what he lacked. In Desdemona he saw the hero in him. In Iago his masculinity and manhood. This dependence further enhanced his self-ruin. This inadequacy failed him to discern Iago's predatory design. He responded to Iago's evaluations rather than on his own. His lack of insight into human nature made him a confused man unabling him to see Desdemona's innocence.

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned
spirit,
Of human dealing,

(III. iii. 262-64.)

Othello failed to recognize Desdemona's individuality. His concept of her was too superficial.

To say my wife is fair, feeds well,
loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays and
dances well;

(III. iii. 188-89.)

His frailty made him an easy victim of jealousy. His love having lacked the quality and depth. His final basis of Desdemona's infidelity was the lost handkerchief. This showed how much value he put on trivialities. His misery uncovered his regard for women and marriage. It brought out his latent misogynistic and misogynistic tendencies.

..... O curse of marriage,
That we can call these creatures ours
And not their appetites!

(III. iii. 272-74.)

If that the earth could teem with women's
tears,
Each drop she falls would prove a
crocodile.

(IV. i. 241-42.)

Othello felt that his world had fallen apart when he believed that Desdemona was unfaithful to him. He moved under the spell of self-deceit. He saw the reflection of his own deceit in Desdemona's "insincerity". It was this reflection that ate him. And to end the spell was to cut the source of reflection. Thus, the murder of Desdemona. He felt that his honor was saved by the act he has chosen.

"In nonandrogynous, nonintegrated men, the anima remains unconscious and is projected on the women around them. They see women as either benevolent or malefic anima, which accounts for the familiar virgin-whore complex. Psychologically, what we do not control controls us. The projection of the anima indicates unresolved forces in the unconscious that lead men to worship women as saints or condemn them as sluts and witches. A man out of touch with his own sexual feelings too readily projects these troublesome desires upon women. He is unable to befriend or feel emotionally close to any woman. He does not wish to know any woman well because he is afraid to know himself well - especially the less masculine aspects of himself."²

Othello feared to be criticized by others. His performance of self-assertiveness were pretentious and affected. Purely intended for self-dramatizations and justification.

Certain, men should be what they seem.

(III. iii. 132.)

To justify his acts - his marriage and suicide for example required the presence of an audience. It was for him to be able to show his convictions and his strengths. The presence of an audience assured him of their

² Diane Elizabeth Dreher, Domination and Defiance Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986), p. 144.

compassion and the preservation of that aspect of respect which the society held for him. This reveals that Othello had an undeveloped self-confidence and that his motives are for self-aggrandizement. He loved to pose as a hero. It filled the vacuum in him. He worshiped his achievements and enjoyed the presence of people who equally adored him for his achievements.

Desdemona's innocence and submissiveness are highly regarded. Her complicity to the tragedy however can not be overlooked. She was a woman caught in the web of her father's image and shadow. She needed someone to release her from the tangle. She found in Othello the straw to tie her bundle. Her admiration of Othello and the quality of affection he gave him unraveled her arrested emotional development.

"Desdemona's character demonstrates how the traditional feminine role reinforces masochism and neurotic self-effacement. The neurotic has an idealized self-image, composed of lovable qualities, such as unselfishness, goodness, generosity, humility, saintliness, nobility, sympathy. Helplessness, suffering, and martyrdom are also secondarily glorified. Her life revolves around those she loves, and doing anything for herself is seen as "selfish". She is unable to recognize, let alone act, on her own desires."³

³ Dreher, loc. cit., pp. 13-14.

"Deprived of self-esteem, idolizing their men, such women lack assertiveness needed for self-defense. In the face of danger, they remain passive, letting destructive forces take their course and affirming a self-image that glorifies weakness and suffering as the ultimate proof of nobility, Sabotaged by an unhealthy ideal, these women become accomplices in their destruction.⁴

Desdemona's excessive gentleness was in itself a weakness. She did not prove her innocence nor did she defend herself. Though she pleaded for her life, her plead was still submissive to her death.

Kill me to-morrow, let me live to-night!
(V. ii. 85.)

And because she did not defy Othello's act, she destroyed both of them.

The fatal flaw in their marriage was that they did not recognize their individuality and discover each other's nature. Their marriage was built on their obsessions, illusions and superficialities. Desdemona failed to recognize the uneasiness of Othello's sexuality. Had she recognized this, she would have not persisted on Cassio's cause. Her persistence alienated her from her husband.

"In the absolutist, dynastic meaning of marriage

⁴ Ibid.

women were everything that men were not: silent, submissive, powerless. But in the marriage of true minds, where romantic love is not simply an adolescent aberration but the cement of a life-long relationship, men and women are alike - 'not always', as Donne explained in a marriage sermon, 'like in complexion, nor like in years, nor like in fortune, nor like in birth, but like in minde, like in disposition, like in the love of God, and of one another (Donne 1957, p.247)."⁵

Desdemona was inconsiderate, cold hearted and deceitful to Brabantio. Her total disregard for her father's ill feelings is beyond moral tolerance. This anger and sour disappointment would have been easily mended. After all Brabantio still acclaimed her virtues even after he heard of Desdemona's choice. But she was too eager and concerned to pursue her heart's desires entirely ignoring her father. She perfectly performed her deceitful act that even her father failed to notice it. Her dishonesty and deceitfulness were the same web she wove for herself.

"Heidegger echoes the ancient theme of wisdom: wisdom is always the acceptance of what is. If we have done that - then we arrive at the authenticity which reveals ourself to ourself and, at the same time, permits us to reveal what we are. And there you see the function

⁵ Catherine Belsey, "Alternative Shakespeares," in Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies, ed. John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1985), p.175.

of authenticity: if I am truly authentic, then I am true, then I can reveal Being as it is. If I am unaware of all this, I fall into the inauthentic. I disguise my reality and my essence from myself, and thereby become incapable of perceiving and revealing reality as it really is."⁶

Iago's loss of military promotion

Despise me if I do not: three great ones
of the city,
In personal suit to make me his
lieutenant,
Of capp'd to him: and, by faith of man,
I know my price, I am worth no worse a
place.
But he, as loving his own pride and
purposes,
EVades them, with a bombast circumstance
Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war;
(And in conclusion,)
Nonsuits my mediators; for, 'Certes,' says
he,
'I have already chosen my officer.'
And what was he?
Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
(I. i. 8-20.)

and the suspicion that Othello cuckolded him

But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lustful Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat, the thought
whereof

⁶ Jean Wahl, A Short History of Existentialism
(New York: The Philosophical Library, 1949), p.41.

Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my
inwards
And nothing can nor shall content my soul
Till I am even with him, wife for wife;
(II. ii. 296-307.)

sowed his resentment and revenge against Othello.

Iago's outward appearance of honesty made him stand higher in esteem and confidence. Behind this was a baser, cold, evil and dark self. He is full of ineffable desires and thwarted sexuality. Iago is a dramatic representation of fatal ambition and sexual jealousy.

He held a nihilistic view of women's chastity and was cynical of the whole of mankind. He had dissimulated his real self which made him lose his identity, worth and dignity. He is a victim of his imaginations and distorted thoughts. He found it difficult to live and to accept his image because of the strong feeling of inferiority and ungratified desires.

"The insecure individual by contrast cannot appreciate good fortune, the world is to him intrinsically hostile, and he will not believe in the evidences of good faith."⁷

And because he has not seen the reason to his existence and life, he projected a sense of destructiveness.

⁷ Ross Stagner, Psychology of Personality (Tokyo: Kogakusha Company, Ltd., 1961), p.197.

The only hope left for him was to see the destruction of people who he thought had a part in his failures. While his original plan was to ignite jealousy, his plan went beyond his control. A projection of his own character.

Othello, Desdemona and Iago suffered from the struggle of "I" and "the others", truth and fiction, masculine and feminine, isolation and collectivism, honesty and deceit. The choices they made did not alleviate them from their emptiness but enhanced it. Their weaknesses or wickedness returned to them in a much fuller force. They failed to accept their selves which could have released them from their insecurity, fear and isolation. Their acts multiplied the anarchy, despair and egocentric defensiveness in them.

Shakespeare in his play exposes the tragedy of alienation. When Iago said, "I am not what I am", he spoke for his two other mirrors.

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